

AFRL member conquers difficult swim in channel

by Ronald Fry, AFRL headquarters

LONDON — Captain Tim Lawrence has never shied away from a challenge.

Over the years, he's set high goals and challenged himself physically and mentally. He's climbed mountains in Colorado, got bruised and battered on the rugby field as a cadet at the U.S. Air Force Academy and studied endlessly to earn his Ph.D. in satellite engineering at the University of Surrey in England.

The 33-year-old Air Force Research Laboratory scientist is even challenged in his work as he searches throughout Europe for space-related technologies that will aid the Air Force as it transitions to an aerospace force for the 21st Century.

But one of the biggest challenges of his life came in the early-morning darkness of Sept. 4 when he stood on the shore of the English Channel, challenged by the prospect of swimming some 28 miles through choppy and chilly waters to the coast of France.

Fourteen hours and 59 minutes later, he had met the challenge and conquered it.

While records are incomplete, it is believed Lawrence is the first active duty U.S. Air Force member to swim the channel — a feat accomplished by less than 10 percent of those who try.

"When it was over, I was cold, tired and numb. But I felt rewarded for all the long hours of hard training," Lawrence said.

Lawrence is chief of space technology at the European Office of Aerospace Research and Defense in London, a detachment of AFRL's Air Force Office of Scientific Research. He has been assigned there since completing his doctorate in 1998.

His job is to represent the laboratory and seek out European research efforts that could possibly lead to collaborative efforts with the Air Force. His area of expertise is satellites and rocket propulsion.

It was during this assignment that he first became interested in swimming the channel. He researched the swim and became attracted to the "mental toughness" needed to complete the swim. He began training and passed a series of tests administered by the Channel Swimming Association, qualifying him to attempt the swim.

Lawrence then contacted Freeda Streeter who had helped train her daughter, Alison, to swim the channel 38 times — the world record for most crossings. She developed a tough training



NOT JUST A "STROKE" OF LUCK — Captain Tim Lawrence, an Air Force Research Laboratory scientist who searches Europe for space-related technologies, battles the chilly, choppy waters of the English Channel. He completed the 28-mile swim from England to France in about 15 hours.

program, which included drinking a high-carbohydrate mixture that Lawrence said tasted like "liquid wheat."

He was now on his way to crossing the channel, but it would be more challenging than expected, and he would almost give up his quest.

His first attempt in 1997 ended with him surrendering to hypothermia after completing nearly 14 hours of the swim. He lost 20 pounds and was bedfast for two days. A second attempt in August 1998 ended when a storm blew into the channel causing the temperature to drop and halting the swim when he again suffered hypothermia.

"That's when I told myself I probably didn't have the physical ability to complete the swim," the captain said. "I was extremely disappointed."

But Lawrence's coach had faith in the captain's stamina and ability. The coach suggested Lawrence attempt the Manhattan Swim, a 28-mile route around New York City's Manhattan Island in June. After resuming a daily training routine of two swims and three sets of 750 sit-ups, he circled the island in just

under eight hours and finished fourth in his age group.

The coach then suggested a 12-hour swim in the cold waters of England's Dover Harbor followed by a six-hour swim the next day. Lawrence completed both and was convinced he was ready to attack the channel.

He entered the water at about 5 a.m. Sept. 4. The temperature of the air would reach 80 degrees during the day, but the water temperature never climbed above 65. A steady wind kept the waves constant. "I literally had to attack the waves," Lawrence said.

He headed for the coast of France and all went well until about the seven-hour point when he strained his right shoulder. Fearful that his boat pilot, following in an escort boat, might stop the swim because of the injury, Lawrence said nothing other than he was experiencing some pain. His coach passed him some Advil and he kept swimming.

Lawrence said the waves caused him to swallow a lot of sea water which upset his stomach, but he kept going until he reached the even colder waters at mid-channel. "That's when my whole body went numb," Lawrence said. "The boat crew said they could actually see my body change color."

As he neared the French coast, a strong tidal current pulled Lawrence along the coast, making the final 1,500 meters the most difficult. If unable to overcome the current, he would be rushed out to sea and left even farther from the coast. Here he was joined by a pace swimmer, as permitted by channel swimming rules, who swam by his side and kept him focused.

"I kept telling myself that I'd swam 1,500 meters in a pool hundreds of times. I knew I could do it," he said. "I could

see the coastline, but because of the strong current, it seemed like it took forever to get there. I don't know where it came from, but I found the energy to finish."

When Lawrence felt his feet touch the sandy bottom of Wissant Beach, France, he staggered onto shore and collapsed in a ball. "I couldn't believe I was on French soil."

Lawrence credited his coach, the boat crew and pace swimmer with helping him complete the swim. "They really made the difference at the end. They encouraged me to finish," he said.

Once he was on shore and caught his breath, it was time to carry out a time-honored tradition. All swimmers who successfully cross the channel are expected to collect some souvenir rocks from the nearby cliffs. That left one more challenge for Lawrence, he had to swim back out to the escort boat, rocks nestled in one arm, for the ride back to England.

"I now feel a great sense of accomplishment," Lawrence said. "I'd felt somewhat cheated on my first two attempts because I trained so hard and wasn't able to finish. I now feel I've represented my office, the Air Force and my hometown well."

What's next for the captain? He's got his eye on a swim across Lake Zurich in Switzerland, a 40-mile swim around Jersey Island off the coast of France and running in the Dublin, Ireland Marathon.

"You can never quit," Lawrence said. "That's what life is all about, setting high, achievable goals. I believe anyone can swim the channel if they're willing to set the goal and work hard." @